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### USA Next campaign targets AARP

By William M. Welch and Jim Drinkard, USA TODAY

WASHINGTON — An organization stirring controversy in the debate over Social Security's future is applying techniques learned through years of fundraising for conservative causes.



This ad accuses the AARP of a 'shameful record of liberal activism.'

USA Next

The group, USA Next, has been around since 1991 under the name United Seniors Association. It has long styled itself as "the conservative alternative to AARP," the 35-million-member retiree organization it is taking on over Social Security.

President Bush is seeking to remake the 70-year-old social insurance program by including an option for individuals to invest in the stock market through personal accounts. How that proposal fares will affect millions of Americans, making it prime fodder for USA Next Chairman Charlie Jarvis, who learned his craft from conservative fundraising pioneer and United Seniors Association founder Richard Viguerie.

Viguerie's formula has changed little over the years: stir conservatives to open their checkbooks using sharp attacks, dire warnings and strong rhetoric. "The only time we win is when there is a sharp ideological difference," he told an interviewer more than a decade ago.

Blending those well-worn direct-mail tactics with new Internet-based fundraising, the group has taken up a variety of causes. The most recent was supporting Bush's Medicare prescription-drug program by using millions of dollars from the pharmaceutical

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industry.

The group plans an initial \$10 million campaign accusing AARP of a "shameful record of liberal activism," including backing gay marriage. Its first step was an Internet ad last week that asserted AARP supports gay marriage. It included a picture of two men kissing at what appeared to be their wedding over the words, "The real AARP agenda."

In style and tactics, the USA Next campaign appears to be modeled on the effort by the Swift Boat Veterans for Truth to tarnish Democrat John Kerry in last year's presidential campaign.

The veterans group parlayed an initial financial stake, about \$500,000, into a much larger political force through a provocative TV ad. That generated media attention, which led to stepped-up fundraising. The group, later renamed Swift Vets and POWs for Truth, raised and spent \$22.5 million on hard-hitting anti-Kerry ads, putting it among the most influential of the independent political groups in the campaign.

Many of those involved in the USA Next campaign are alumni of the Swift Boat ad campaign. Strategist Chris LaCivita has been hired. The group is looking to enlist the same media firm that devised the Swift Boat ads, Stevens Reed Curcio & Potholm. Creative Response Concepts, a public relations firm that worked for the Swift Boat Veterans, and Regnery Publishing, which produced an anti-Kerry book for the Swift Boat group, also are helping.

Jarvis' group ran 19,800 TV ads last year supporting conservative causes and plans a similar campaign this year demanding that AARP "stop scaring seniors." He defended the gay-marriage ad by saying AARP's Ohio affiliate had opposed a gay-marriage ban in that state.

AARP says it has taken no position on gay marriage and dismisses USA Next's attacks. "We've deliberately not responded to erroneous accusations of USA Next because USA Next does not propose legislation, vote on legislation, nor does it sign legislation into law," spokesman Steve Hahn said.

Sen. Jon Corzine, D-N.J., called on President Bush last week to repudiate the group. "The motive for USA Next's irresponsible use of such hot-button issues is not difficult to decipher; if you can't attack the message, attack the messenger," he wrote.

Jarvis said his group has a membership of 1.5 million, though not all pay dues. Like AARP, it offers insurance and financial investments as well as travel discount arrangements with major hotels and other businesses, he said. Its national chairman is former TV personality Art Linkletter, 93. Donors who give \$100 or more get to participate in telephone conference calls with Linkletter.

Jarvis said financial support also comes from the food industry, pharmaceuticals, health care, energy, small business and trade associations, and other corporations "that agree with what I call my rock 'n' roll, free-market approach."

Jarvis joined the group in 2001. He previously worked as a congressional aide and deputy undersecretary of Interior in the Reagan administration. He was campaign manager for 2000 GOP presidential hopeful Gary Bauer before leaving in a dispute with Bauer. He was executive vice president of Focus on the Family, a fundamentalist



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